

Conducting Effective Structured Interviews

Resource Guide for Hiring Managers and Supervisors



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Introduction

Hiring decisions are among the most important decisions you will make as a manager or supervisor. Research by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board indicates that Federal managers rely heavily on interviews to identify the best candidates. Interviews are an excellent tool in the selection process but can be problematic if not done correctly. This resource guide has been developed to help you interview and select top performers in your next hiring process.

What is a Structured Interview?

Structured interviews are interviews that use multiple mechanisms (or elements) to help make the interview job-related and systematic. Research shows that structured interviews are twice as effective as unstructured interviews in predicting job performance. Unstructured interviews, where interviewers rely on unaided judgment, are subject to bias and may expose you to future complaints or challenges. The elements of a structured interview include:

1. Base questions on job analysis. *(Ensures fairness and impartiality)*
2. Ask effective questions. *(Evokes responses that help you make the decision)*
3. Ask each candidate the same questions. *(Ensures fairness and impartiality)*
4. Use detailed rating scales. *(Helps quantify subjective data)*
5. Train interviewers. *(Ensures professionalism)*
6. Use interview panels so that more than one person conducts the interview. *(Provides checks and balances to ensure fairness and impartiality)*
7. Take notes. *(Memory can be short and provides paper trail for defending selection if needed)*
8. Assess candidate responses objectively by using the rating scales to score candidates. *(Promotes objectivity and complies with Merit System Principles)*

Preparing for the Interview

Conduct a Job Analysis.

If you spent quality time reviewing the job description and selecting the critical knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA's) before the position was posted, most of this step has been completed. After you review the major duties, KSA's or Occupational Questionnaire elements, identify the key competencies needed to be successful in this position. Examples of key competencies include: Technical Skills, Interpersonal Effectiveness, Problem-Solving, Flexibility, Teamwork, Self-Management and Communication Skills.

Develop questions in advance.

Studies indicate that past performance is one of the best predictors of future performance. Therefore, the most effective questions you can ask a candidate are behavioral-based questions. Behavioral-based questions require the candidate to describe specific situations, actions and outcomes from their past experience. An example of a behavioral-based question for a customer service competency might be:

Tell me about a specific time when you had to deal with a difficult customer complaint. Describe your actions. What was the outcome?

More examples of behavioral based questions can be found in [Appendix A](#) and in the Resources section.

Prepare a list of questions that relate to the knowledge, skills and abilities for the position. Prioritize the list of the most important job qualities that are critical to the position, along with any other questions that will help you assess fit for the position. A good question is job-related, focused on past behavior and open-ended.

Develop rating scales.

Determine a rating scale that you will use to evaluate candidates' responses. It can be as simple as a 1-5 scale (1= Low, 3=Average, 5= Outstanding), or adjectives such as Unacceptable, Acceptable, and Excellent. A more detailed scale will include anchors, or narrative descriptions of each level, and examples of behavior and accomplishments that are representative of the level. See [Appendix B](#) for examples.

Determine the purpose and format of the interview.

Depending on the number of candidates you need to interview, you can select a variety of interview formats, such as: (1) initial phone interviews to narrow down a large list of candidates and then invite the top candidates in for personal interviews, (2) individual interview between hiring manager/supervisor and candidate, (3) group or panel interview, and (4) multi-interviewer approach, e.g., immediate supervisor interviews the candidate one-on-one followed by a panel interview of peers. There are many possible combinations, however, a two or three person panel is recommended.

Train interviewers.

It is important that whomever you decide to include in the interviewing process be knowledgeable of the job requirements and trained in establishing rapport with candidates, effective questioning, documentation, evaluating answers, and applying the rating scales.

After deciding the appropriate interviewing panel, the "lead interviewer" (typically the immediate manager) must provide all interviewers with the necessary materials (i.e., resume, interview questions, and rating scales) well ahead of time. If you are conducting panel interviews as a team, you may want to decide uniform questions, which will be asked to each candidate and any candidate-specific questions.

Before calling candidates, set an interview schedule with the interviewers. Most interviews last 45-50 minutes. Allow 10 minutes for each behavioral-based question you choose and 15 minutes at the end of each interview for scoring responses. Reserve times/dates ahead of time with panel members' schedules.

During the Interview

Provide background.

Try to set a relaxed atmosphere for the candidate. If you are using a behavioral-based interview approach, you could provide a handout to the candidate to read before the interview begins. ([See Appendix C](#) for a sample.) Start with an icebreaker about the weather, traffic, etc., or offer the candidate water/coffee. Begin the interview with a brief description of the job and any special requirements (e.g., travel, weekend work, overtime, etc.). Provide the candidate with an overview of the interview format. For instance, tell the candidate that a series of questions will be asked, time will be allowed at the end for the candidate to ask questions, and you and/or other interviewers will be taking notes.

Interviewing do's.

Show respect for the candidate at all times and remember to ask open-ended questions (i.e., questions that cannot be answered with a one-word response). Try to remember the 80/20 Rule—candidates should talk 80%, and you should talk no more than 20% of the time. Listen carefully to what the candidates say, respond when necessary, and always maintain control of the interview.

Use probes.

Probes are phrases used to follow-up open-ended questions that encourage a candidate to reveal more information. Examples include:

- *What did you do?*
- *What did you think about or want?*
- *When did this happen?*
- *Who was involved?*
- *What was your contribution?*
- *What was the result or outcome?* (Note: This is the most important probe since it allows the interviewer to determine the impact, or lack of impact, of the applicant's actions.)

Take notes.

Notes serve two purposes. First, they help you capture the content of the interview vs. relying on memory. The second is that notes help create a “paper trail” which may be useful if you are asked to defend your hiring decision in the future.

Notes should reflect what the candidate says, rather than how he/she said it. Record observations (concrete things) and not evaluations, like “sociable” or “difficult.”

Closing the interview.

Give the candidate 15 minutes at the end of the interview to ask you and/or the panel questions. Let the candidate know what the next steps in the process will be and your expected timeframe. Remember no matter how interested you are in a candidate, do not offer them the position in the interview! You also want to thank the candidate for coming and if time permits, provide a quick tour of the office.

After the Interview

Score responses.

Do immediately after each interview when the information is fresh in your mind. Build in 15 minutes at the end of each interview for this.

Follow up.

Make sure the candidate's responses are consistent with information in the application. With the move to Occupational Questionnaires from the written KSA's, verifying the information for accuracy that the candidate has provided in his/her application, will be even more important.

Conduct further assessment with reference checks.

If you clearly have a top choice candidate, you might want to just do references for that individual. If your candidate is very competitive, then you could check references for 2-3 candidates.

Obtain the reference information you need from the candidate if you do not have it already. You will also want to make sure you have the candidate's permission to contact his/her immediate supervisor. One suggested tip: tell the candidate you will be contacting his/her references and ask him/her if there will be any surprises. This gives the candidate an opportunity to explain to you beforehand any special circumstances.

When contacting former or current supervisors for reference checks, use questions based on the key competencies. Try to seek support of information you obtained during the interview. You can use some behavioral-based questioning like, "Has the applicant ever had to deal with difficult customers? Can you recall a specific situation and how he/she handled it?" Be consistent and ask all references the same key questions, so you can compare responses. Here are some other questions you can ask references:

- *How long did the candidate work for you?*
- *What are his/her strengths? Weaknesses?*
- *How would you describe his/her work ethic?*
- *How do you think his/her skills and abilities would fit this position?*
- *Would you rehire him/her? Why or why not? (Always ask this question!)*

Make a selection.

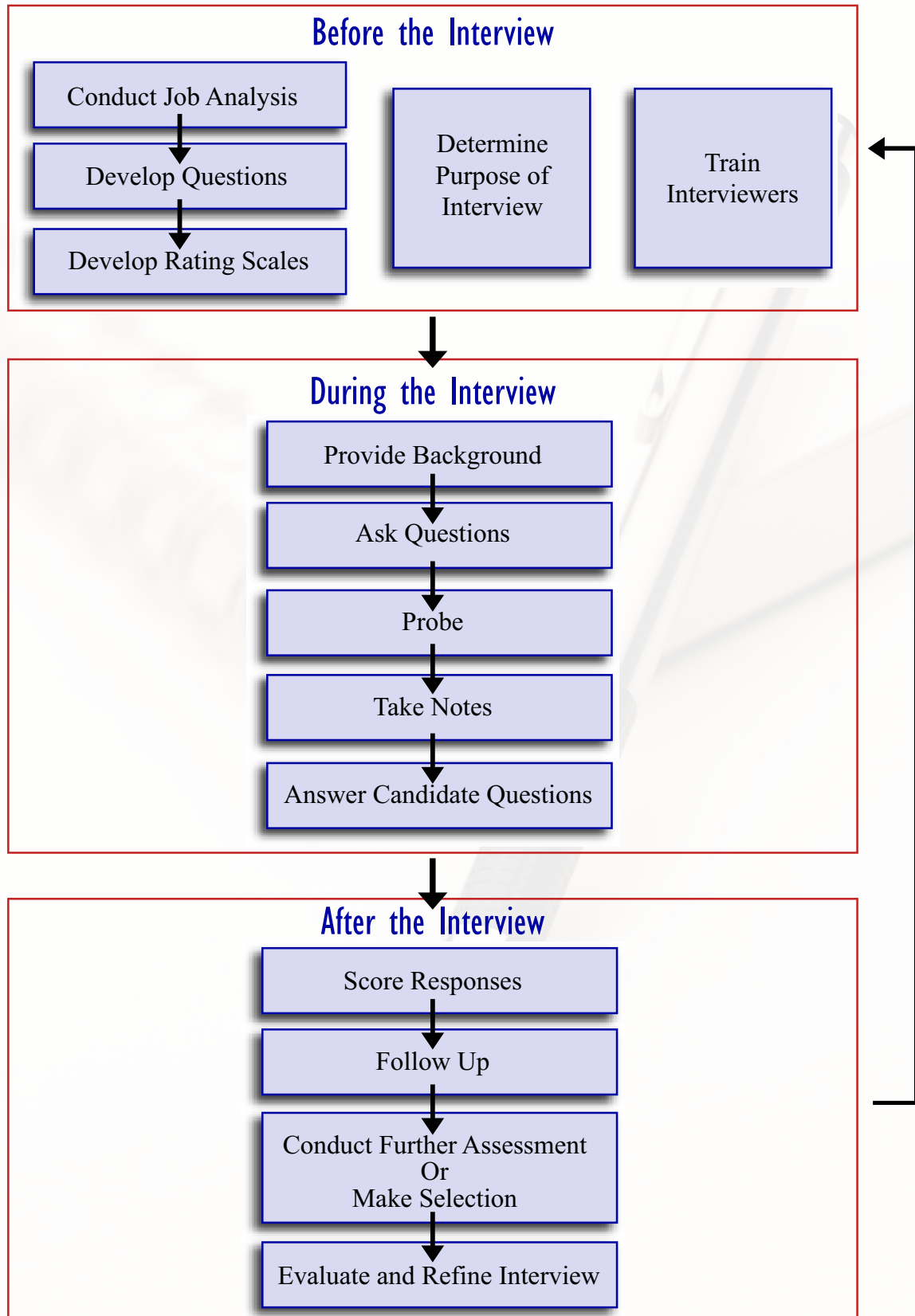
After your reference checks are complete, review all the information gathered from applications/resumes, interviews, and references. If you utilized a panel, gather as a group and complete a Panel Consensus Evaluation Form. (See [Appendix D](#).) If interviewer ratings vary greatly, interviewers should discuss their reasons, resolve any major differences and then use judgment for the final evaluation. Finally, decide if you have a suitable candidate and make your recommendation to the appropriate higher level management official or Human Resources contact.

Reminders.

Whatever process you decide upon, you must adhere to the Merit System Principles and Avoid Prohibited Personnel Practices. A review of legal and illegal questions is provided in [Appendix E](#).

"You're only as good as the people you hire." **Anonymous**

A Model Structured Interview Process



Appendix A—Common Structured Interview Questions

Typically a wide variety of questions can be used to gain information about a candidate's competencies. Use these questions as guides to help you develop questions that target specific job requirements.

1. *Describe a time when you were faced with problems or stresses at work that tested your coping skills. What did you do?*
2. *Give an example of a time when you could not participate in a discussion or could not finish a task because you did not have enough information. What did you do?*
3. *Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision. How did you go about making the decision?*
4. *Tell me about a time when you had to use your spoken communication skills in order to get a point across that was important to you. How did you make your point? What technique or skill worked for you?*
5. *Can you tell me about a job experience in which you had to speak up and tell other people what you thought or felt? What was the result of your action?*
6. *Give me an example of a time when you felt you were able to build motivation in your co-workers or subordinates. How did you motivate them? What were the results?*
7. *Tell me about a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy even though you did not agree with it. What was the result? How did you feel?*
8. *Describe the worst customer or co-worker you have ever had and tell me how you dealt with him or her.*
9. *Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to gain information needed to solve a problem and then tell me how you analyzed the information and came to a decision. What was the result or what happened?*
10. *Give me an example of an important goal you had set and tell me about your progress in reaching that goal. How did you go about setting the goal?*
11. *Describe the most significant written document, report, or presentation that you've completed. What was the process you used to write this document? What was the impact or result of your efforts?*
12. *Give me an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done. What caused the situation that required this extraordinary effort? How did you feel about all this extra effort?*

Appendix A—Common Structured Interview Questions

13. Give me an example of a time when you were able to communicate successfully with another person, even when that individual may not have personally liked you. What was the result of your communication?
14. Describe a situation in which you were able to read another person effectively and guide your actions by your understanding of his/her individual needs or values. What happened?
15. What did you do in your last job in order to be effective with your organization and planning? Be specific. How did you deal with competing priorities?
16. Describe the most creative work-related project you have completed.
17. Tell me about a time when you made a suggestion to improve the quality and efficiency of the work done in your unit.
18. Give me an example of a time when you had to analyze another person or situation carefully in order to be effective in guiding your action or decision. How did you decide what action or decision to take?
19. What did you do in your last job to contribute toward a teamwork environment? Be specific. What were the results of this teamwork?
20. Give me an example of a problem you faced on the job and tell me how you solved it.
21. Describe a situation in which you were able to positively influence the actions of others in a desired direction. How did this affect others in that environment?
22. Tell me about a situation in the past year in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker. How did you handle the situation? What was the result?
23. Describe a situation in which others within your organization depended on you. What would they tell me about this situation?
24. Describe your most recent group effort. What was your role? How would you change the group to be more effective?

Appendix B—Sample Structured Interview Questions and Rating Scales

Competency: Interpersonal Skills

Definition:

Shows understanding, courtesy, tact, empathy, concern; develops and maintains relationships; may deal with people who are difficult, hostile, distressed; relates well to people from varied backgrounds and situations; is sensitive to individual differences.

Lead Question:

Describe a situation in which you had to deal with people who were upset about a problem.

Probes:	What events led up to this situation? Who was involved?	What specific actions did you take? What was the outcome or result?
Benchmark Level	Level Definition	Level Examples
5	Establishes and maintains ongoing working relationships with management, other employees, internal or external stakeholders, or customers. Remains courteous when discussing information or eliciting highly sensitive or controversial information from people who are reluctant to give it. Effectively handles situations involving a high degree of tension or discomfort involving people who are demonstrating a high degree of hostility or distress.	Presents controversial findings tactfully to irate organization senior management officials regarding shortcomings of a newly installed computer system, software programs, and associated equipment.
4		Mediates disputes concerning system design/architecture, the nature and capacity of data management systems, system resources allocations, or other equally controversial/sensitive matters.
3	Cooperates and works well with management, other employees, or customers, on short-term assignments. Remains courteous when discussing information or eliciting moderately sensitive or controversial information from people who are hesitant to give it. Effectively handles situations involving a moderate degree of tension or discomfort involving people who are demonstrating a moderate degree of hostility or distress.	Courteously and tactfully delivers effective instruction to frustrated customers. Provides technical advice to customers and the public on various types of IT such as communication or security systems, data management procedures or analysis
2		Familiarizes new employees with administrative procedures and office systems.
1	Cooperates and works well with management, other employees, or customers during brief interactions. Remains courteous when discussing information or eliciting non-sensitive or non-controversial information from people who are willing to give it. Effectively handles situations involving little or no tension, discomfort, hostility, or distress.	Responds courteously to customers' general inquiries. Greet and assists visitors attending a meeting within own organization.

Individual Evaluation Form

Candidate to be assessed: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Problem Solving

Definition:

Identifies problems; determines accuracy and relevance of information; uses sound judgment to generate and evaluate alternatives, and to make the recommendations.

Question:

Describe a situation in which you identified a problem and evaluated the alternatives to make a recommendation or decision. What was the problem and who was affected?

Probes:

How did you generate and evaluate your alternatives? What was the outcome?

Describe specific behaviors observed: (Use back of sheet, if necessary)

1- Low	2	3-Average	4	5-Outstanding
Uses logic to identify alternatives to solve routine problems. Reacts to and solves problems by gathering and applying information from standard materials or sources that provide a limited number of alternatives.		Uses logic to identify alternatives to solve moderately difficult problems. Identifies and solves problems by gathering and applying information from a variety of materials or sources that provide several alternatives.		Uses logic to identify alternatives to solve complex or sensitive problems. Anticipates problems and identifies and evaluates potential sources of information and generates alternatives to solve problems where standards do not exist.

Final Evaluation:

Printed Name:

Signature:

Appendix C—Handout to Candidates Before Structured Interviews

We would like to spend the next hour getting to know more about you. During this time, we will be asking you questions about your past experiences and qualifications and how you have dealt with various situations. After about 45 minutes, we will take some time to answer any questions you might have about the job, duties, or organization.

During the interview, we will ask you some questions about how you have dealt with various situations in the past. These questions have been designed to assess the competencies needed to succeed in this position within the Federal Government. Specifically, your past experiences in the following competencies will be assessed: ***(Agencies should insert their chosen competencies here).***

All applicants will be asked the same questions and will be evaluated against the same criteria. After you have given your response, interviewers may ask you follow-up questions to clarify any points in your answer.

In answering the questions, you may describe work, family, or social situations and how you handled them. We would like you to tell us what you did in each situation, even if it was a team effort.

In response to each question, you should be as specific and detailed as possible in describing the situation or problem, what you actually did and when (approximate dates), what you thought about, wanted, or felt, who was involved, what your contribution was, and what the outcome or result of your actions were. We are interested in your estimate of the proportion or percentage of this outcome or result that was directly attributable to you and the proportion attributable to other people. If you do not give an estimate of your contribution, we will assume that you are claiming total credit for this achievement.

Once we have finished with all the questions, you will have an opportunity to ask questions about the specifics of the prospective position.

Do you have any questions about the interview procedures?

Appendix D—Panel Consensus Evaluation Form

Candidate: _____

Date: _____

Panel Consensus Evaluation Form

Instructions:

Translate each individual evaluation for each competency onto this form. If all of the individual competency evaluations are within one rating scale point, enter the average of the evaluations in the column labeled Group Evaluation. If more than one point separates any two raters, a consensus discussion must occur with each party justifying his/her evaluation. The lead interviewer or his/her designee should take notes on the consensus discussion in the space provided. Any changes in evaluation should be initialed and a final evaluation entered for each competency.

Competency	Final Individual Evaluations			Group Evaluation
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
Interpersonal Skills				
Self-Management				
Reasoning				
Decision Making				
Problem Solving				
Oral Communication				
Total Score				

Consensus Discussion Notes:

Signature Panel Member 1: _____

Signature Panel Member 2: _____

Signature Panel Member 3: _____

Appendix E—Pre-Employment Questions Guide

Typically a wide variety of questions can be used to gain information about a candidate's competencies. Use these questions as guides to help you develop questions that target specific job requirements.

SUBJECT	DO NOT ASK	YOU MAY ASK
Gender	Are you male or female? What are the names and relationships of persons living with you?	None.
Residence	Do you own or rent? Give the names and relationships of persons residing with you.	What is your present address?
Race/Color	What is your race? What color is your hair, eyes, or skin?	None.
Age	What is your date of birth? How old are you?	If hired, can you provide proof that you are at least 18 years of age?
National Origin	What is your ancestry, national origin, descent ancestry, parentage, or nationality? What is the nationality of your parents spouse?	What languages do you speak or write fluently? (Do not ask unless strictly job related.)
Disabilities	Are you disabled?	Are you capable of performing the essential functions of this position, with or without reasonable accommodation?

Appendix E—Pre-Employment Questions Guide

SUBJECT	DO NOT ASK	YOU MAY ASK
Marital or Family Status	What is your marital status? What is your spouse's name? What was your maiden name? How many children do you have? Are you pregnant? Do you plan to have children? What day-care provisions have you made for your children?	None. (An employer may ask if candidates have any commitments or responsibilities preventing them from meeting attendance requirements, or if they anticipate lengthy work absences. Make sure you ask this question of all applicants.)
Arrests and Convictions	Have you ever been arrested? Have you ever been charged with any crime?	Have you been convicted of any crime? (If the application form asks for information on convictions, the employer should indicate that a conviction itself does not constitute an automatic bar to employment, and will be considered as it relates to fitness to perform the job in question.)
Religion	What is your religious affiliation or denomination? What church do you belong to? What is the name of your pastor, minister, or rabbi? What religious holidays do you observe?	None. (If you wish to know if an applicant is available to work Saturday or Sunday shifts, ask: "Are you available to work on Saturdays or Sundays if needed?" Make sure you ask this question of all applicants.)
Citizenship	What country are you a citizen? Are you or other members of your family naturalized citizens? If so, when did you or they become a U.S. citizen? Attach a copy of your naturalization papers to your application form.	Are you a citizen of the United States? If hired, are you able to prove eligibility to work in the United States?

References & Resources

Web sites:

Department of Veterans Affairs: *Performance Based Interviewing* <http://www.va.gov/pbi/supervisor.htm>

* See “PBI Sample Questions” for excellent examples of behavioral-based questions

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. *Discriminatory Practices*. http://www.eeoc.gov/abouteeo/overview_practices.html

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. *Enforcement Guidance: Preemployment Disability-Related Questions and Medical Examinations* <http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/preemp.html>

GovLeaders.org (2002-2004) *Hiring the Best People for Your Agency* <http://www.govleaders.org/hiring.htm>

U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (2003). *The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential* <http://www.mspb.gov/studies/interview.htm>

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (1999). *Preparing for and Conducting an Effective Job Interview* <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/ek99/jobinter.htm>

Other Resources:

United States Office of Personnel Management. *Structured Interviews: Interview Guide and Evaluation Materials for Structured Interviews* (available through HR/CSP or CDRC)

Smalley, Larry R. (1997) *Interviewing and Selecting High Performers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer.

Maddux, Robert B. (1994) *Quality Interviewing: A Step-by-Step Action Plan for Success*. Menlo Park, California: Crisp Publications.

Via State’s Intranet: FasTrac Courses:

<http://fsi.state.gov/admin/reg/default.asp?Cat=FasTrac>

The Pre-Interview Process, HR0201, 2.0 hours

Conducting Effective Interviews, HR0202, 1.5 hours

Critical Parameters for Evaluating Candidates, HR0203, 5.5 hours

Preparing for the Behavioral Interview, HR0213, 3.0 hours

Conducting the Behavioral-Based Interview, HR0214, 2.5 hours

Behavioral Interviewing Simulation, HR0210, 0.5 hours

This document was created by:

Maureen Kim, Senior Career Counselor

Career Development Resource Center, U.S. Department of State

SA-1, Columbia Plaza, Room L-321

2401 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20520

For questions or feedback, please call Maureen at (202) 663-3033, or email: KimMH2@state.gov.